



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Reformed Theology in the British Isles

Citation for published version:

Fergusson, DAS 2016, Reformed Theology in the British Isles. in PT Nimmo & DAS Fergusson (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology.*, 16, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 248-268. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139225670.016>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/CCO9781139225670.016](https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139225670.016)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology

Publisher Rights Statement:

This material has been published in "The Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology" edited by Paul T. Nimmo and David A. S. Fergusson. This version is free to view and download for personal use only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



16. Reformed Theology in the British Isles

David Fergusson

Abstract

Across the British Isles, the theology of the Reformed churches was shaped by similar trends, movements, controversies and influences, although these were inflected by significant contextual differences. The period from 1700-2000 is explored *inter alia* with reference to the legacy of the Westminster Confession, the encounter with Enlightenment thought, the impact of Biblical criticism and Darwinian science, and twentieth-century influences, including personalist philosophy and the theology of Karl Barth. The question is raised as to whether a common Reformed identity in continuity with 16th century confessional traditions can be discerned.

Keywords – British theology, Westminster Confession, Biblical criticism, Karl Barth

1. Introduction

This essay explores some developments within Reformed theology in the British Isles from 1700-2000. The field is defined by the work of theologians from churches which are formally aligned with the Reformed tradition – these include principally the Presbyterian and Congregational churches of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland, many of which belong today to the World Communion of Reformed Churches.¹ By

¹ 'The World Communion of Reformed Churches is committed to embody a Reformed identity as articulated in the Ecumenical Creeds of the early church, in the historic confessions of the Reformation, and as continued in the life and witness of the Reformed community.' Article II of the Constitution of the WCRC.

restricting the discussion in this way, no attempt will be made to consider the significant influence of Reformed theology in the evangelical wing of the Anglican churches or within Methodist and Baptist circles.²

What will emerge are common patterns of engagement with distinctive themes and problems: the legacy of Reformed orthodoxy and debates around election and the scope of Christ's atonement; Arian and Unitarian developments, particularly amongst English Presbyterians; the influence of Enlightenment philosophy; the challenges of Biblical criticism; and the impact of German theology from the mid-19th century onwards. Each of these challenges was received and met in ways that reflect the different ecclesiological and socio-political conditions that obtained across the British Isles. The established and national Church of Scotland was Reformed and Presbyterian, and dominated the Divinity Faculties of the ancient universities. In England, by contrast, the Reformed tradition was represented in the Dissenting Academies and in ways that reflected the greater religious and theological diversity of English Nonconformism. The religious culture of Wales was somewhat different, with strong revivalist strains ensuring that scholastic debates amongst Calvinist theologians continued much later than elsewhere. And in Northern Ireland, the reception of Biblical criticism, evolutionary theory and German theology was more cautious and generally at a slower pace than in Scotland where the socio-political status of the church appeared more secure. So despite many shared features and much interaction, the Reformed tradition developed in different ways across the UK. One feature that almost all Reformed theologians shared, however, was a strong commitment to the

² The exception is Welsh Calvinistic Methodism which is largely synonymous with the Presbyterian Church of Wales.

office of preaching. This ensured that the vocation of the theologian was closely related to the demands of the pulpit.

2. The Confessional Legacy

Much doctrinal output wrestled with the legacy of standards such as the *Westminster Confession* (1647) and the *Savoy Declaration* (1658). Despite their ecclesiological differences, both reflected the prevailing Reformed orthodoxy of the 17th century. Yet, by the beginning of the 18th century, signs of stress in the reception of these confessional standards were already evident. Most of these were generated by the doctrine of election and related notions such as a limited or particular atonement. Familiar concerns can be detected around the justice of God, the free offer of the gospel to all, and the unconditional love of Christ. These issues were later intensified by the experience of working in mission fields outside the Christian West and the arrival of higher criticism in the British Isles.

Anxieties were also registered about the formal status of confessional standards and the role of the state in enforcing them. This was particularly apparent in the first subscription controversy in Ireland in the 1720s when a group of Presbyterians insisted upon freedom of individual conscience with reference to the interpretation of Scripture, refusing in principle the subordinate norms of confessional standards enforceable by ecclesiastical or civil authorities.³ On occasion, this position could be presented as a return to the original ideals of the Reformation and the principle of *sola*

³ See for example I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 41–61.

Scriptura although it also reflects the New Light tendencies of the early Enlightenment. At the same time, the more evangelical Secession churches in the 18th century would also find themselves at odds with traditional Reformed notions of the state as the enforcer of true religion, despite seeking in other respects to maintain the purity of Reformed doctrine.

In Scotland, the ‘Marrow controversy’ followed the circulation and promotion of the ideas expounded in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, an anonymous mid-17th century compilation in dialogue form of extracts from the leading Reformers.⁴ Thomas Boston, minister at Simprin, came across the *Marrow* while visiting a parishioner and found its teachings to be a light sent from God. The Marrow offers a more evangelical brand of Reformed theology which paved the way after the covenanting era for the transition from a cerebral and legalistic version of Westminster confessionalism as the state sanctioned religion, to the experiential and individualistic forms of evangelical revivalism that would flourish later in the 18th century. Yet the teachings of the Marrow aroused controversy and opposition within the courts of the church, particularly its claims about an evangelical repentance succeeding faith, expressions which suggested an unlimited atonement, and its emphasis upon assurance as intrinsic to faith. Its remarks about the role of law in the Christian life raised familiar hackles against antinomianism. From a distance of three centuries, the actual dogmatic differences between the Marrow men and their opponents such as James Hadow, Principal of St Mary’s College in St Andrews, seem paper thin. Yet the teaching of Boston and the Erskine brothers, Ebenezer and Ralph, led to their being formally rebuked by the General Assembly in 1721, an outcome which even at the time seemed

⁴ The standard work on the Marrow controversy is David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy 1718–28* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988).

unduly harsh. Some of them were later to leave the established church in the First Secession of 1733, a new polity being established which insisted upon the greater spiritual independence of the church from the state. Yet the Marrow theology did not represent a real break with the theology of the Westminster Confession. It is better interpreted as offering a more evangelical reading of the classical Reformed tradition in the face of overbearing legalist tendencies that were in the ascendancy in Scotland after the Act of Settlement (1690) and the Treaty of Union (1707).

Similar concerns were articulated around the same time by Congregationalists in England. Although never as monolithically committed to Westminster orthodoxy as their Scottish Presbyterian counterparts, the Congregationalists had strong defenders of hyper-Calvinism. The Savoy Declaration (1658) modifies or expands the Westminster Confession on key points, including a reference to the spread of the gospel ‘in divers times and by sundry parts’ (20.3), thus suggesting an unrestricted offer to all nations and kinds of people. There is nothing here explicitly to contradict the Westminster Confession but an emphasis on the unrestricted scope of the gospel would later lead to a muting of the doctrines of election and particular or limited atonement.

In 1737, Matthias Maurice published a tract *A Modern Question Modestly Answer’d* in which he argued for a universal preaching of the gospel together with the duty of all to respond. ‘The everlasting gospel is to be preached as God gives opportunity to all people, be they who they will.’⁵ His rebuttal of some key tenets of hyper-Calvinism appears to have won the day in England, and it became the position of

⁵ Matthias Maurice, *A Modern Question Modestly Answer’d* (London, 1737), 21.

those like Philip Doddridge who advocated world mission. One cannot proclaim to the unconverted a doctrine of election which tells them that they might be included in the number of those determined for eternal salvation; such conditionality, as Maurice insisted, was alien to Christ and the teaching of Scripture. As Alan Sell notes, this became ‘more than a matter of homiletic pragmatism; it entailed a moral protest against the kind of God scholastic Calvinism was deemed to portray.’⁶

Yet those who continued to adhere to the classical Reformed tradition were not lacking in possible responses. In Wales, five-point Calvinism continued to flourish with intense debates concerning the nature and extent of the atonement being conducted well into the 19th century. The view of John Elias that Christ’s sufferings were in exact equivalence to the punishment due to the elect was eventually overcome by a more moderate Calvinist consensus combining notions of sufficiency and efficiency in the 1823 Confession of Faith.⁷ The focus increasingly fell upon the doctrine of the atoning work of Christ, rather than election *per se*. Llesis Edwards, the most significant mid-century theologian in Wales, wrote an influential study in 1860 *Athrawiaeth yr Iawn* (The Doctrine of the Atonement) which offered a more irenic yet still recognisably Calvinist account of the personal work of Christ.⁸ In Scotland, Ralph Wardlaw, a descendant of Ebenezer Erskine, published *The Extent of the Atonement* (1830) in which he invoked the old medieval formula that the death of Christ was sufficient for the salvation of all, but efficient only for some. This justified

⁶ Alan P. F. Sell, ‘From Worms to Sunbeams: The Dilution of Calvinism in English Congregationalism’, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel: Theological Themes and Thinkers 1550–2000* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 151.

⁷ See D. Densil Morgan, ‘Calvinism in Wales: c1590–1909’, *Welsh Journal of Religious History*, 4 (2009), 22–36, and ‘Theology Amongst The Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, c.1811–1914’, in John Gwynfor Jones (ed.), *The History of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism, III: Growth and Consolidation* (Historical Society, 2013), 70–89.

⁸ See Morgan, *ibid.*, 76–79.

the universal offer of the gospel while making sense of the admixture of responses. But in the interests of propagating the gospel and reassuring the faithful, the emphasis tended to be placed upon the universal love of God rather than a primal decree which separated elect from reprobate.⁹ With Greville Ewing, Wardlaw founded a Congregational academy in Glasgow in 1811. A courageous supporter of abolitionism, he exercised an influence upon David Livingstone.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, church growth outside the Establishment, particularly in England and Wales, created a strong Nonconformist culture which was evident until the early twentieth century.¹⁰ With its stress upon adult literacy, the attention to lengthy sermons, the encouragement of wide reading, discussion of ideas, and a commitment to poetry and hymnody this generated a political progressivism, often allied to the Whig party, in which Nonconformists lent support to abolitionism, universal suffrage, temperance, access to university education and later to welfare reforms. Ironically, the political effects of this movement were most evident in the new liberalism which flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century just at a time when Nonconformist churches were displaying early signs of their decline.

Within the Scottish Kirk, similar debates surrounding the doctrine of the atonement were conducted against the backdrop of a renascent Calvinist evangelicalism after 1800. The most notable case was that of John McLeod Campbell who was deposed from his ministerial charge in Rhu by the General Assembly of 1831. He was formally

⁹ See Alan Sell, *op. cit.*, 154.

¹⁰ R. Tudor Jones writes of a 'Nonconformist civilization' in the period 1850–1914. See *Congregationalism in Wales* (ed.) Robert Pope, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004).

charged with preaching the doctrine of a universal pardon and maintaining that assurance was of the essence of faith. Ministering thereafter to an independent congregation in Glasgow, McLeod Campbell spent the rest of his career in ecclesiastical isolation. Yet his celebrated work *The Nature of the Atonement* (1856) was to prove a landmark study. Here McLeod Campbell attacks two themes of the classical Reformed tradition – the limitation of the atonement and the idea of penal substitution. In their place, he offers a more relational approach by which Christ's identification with sinners culminated in an act of vicarious repentance on which our reconciliation with God rests. Despite some of the underdeveloped and quixotic features of this account, it can be read as retrieving themes from the Greek Fathers and also Luther who is quoted more frequently than Calvin. Later theologians would regard it as one of the finest works of the Scottish Reformed tradition. A doctrine of universal atonement became more characteristic of Scottish theology and preaching, especially in the work of James Denney, H. R. Mackintosh and Donald Baillie.¹¹ On the occasion of the award of the DD degree to McLeod Campbell in 1868, John Caird remarked that in the long run the heretic had converted the church. Forming a triumvirate with Thomas Erskine of Linlathen and Edward Irving, he is generally viewed as adumbrating significant shifts in Scottish theology during the Victorian period.

In the wake of several theological changes, confessional subscription was heavily modified in late Victorian Scotland. While retaining the Westminster Confession as the sole subordinate standard of faith, the Presbyterian churches claimed that it could

¹¹ See James Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), H.R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet, 1927), Donald M. Baillie, *God Was In Christ* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948).

be consistently upheld alongside a stress on the universal scope of the gospel, its free offer to all, the possible salvation of those who lived beyond the reach of Christian preaching, a symbolic reading of the six days of creation in Genesis 1, and opposition to compulsory measures in religion. In retrospect, this appears to be an uneasy compromise between rival parties which generated a degree of confusion. More than a century later, the Church of Scotland still awaits a confessional resolution of these matters.

3. Engagement with Enlightenment Philosophy

After 1700, Reformed scholars throughout the British Isles were extensively involved in developments in philosophy. Institutional factors were again at work in this process. With establishment of chairs of philosophy in the Scottish universities ensured, philosophy began to function as a discrete discipline alongside theology. The appearance of Dissenting Academies to provide higher education for Nonconformists, who were excluded from Oxbridge, also ensured that Reformed scholars in England, Wales and Ireland were receptive to new philosophical ideas from the time of the early Enlightenment. Much of the interaction was with English deist thought, this resulting in some theological drift. The moderates in Scotland were suspected of harbouring deist leanings. Professor John Simson of Glasgow was twice tried for heresy on account of suspicions that his teachings *inter alia* inclined towards Arianism.¹²

¹² See the discussion in H. M. B. Reid, *The Divinity Professors in the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1923), 204–240.

In English Nonconformism, greater theological latitude proved possible owing to the diversity of institutions, congregational autonomy and an intellectual climate that was more receptive to the ideals of toleration. Many had studied in Glasgow under Simson, Hutcheson and Leechman, scholars who seemed sympathetic to new methods and willing to adopt heterodox conclusions. As a result, we see a movement towards Arianism (in its modern forms) and Unitarianism, partly owing to philosophical influences but also through a close engagement with Scripture. This was particularly marked in Presbyterian rather than Congregational churches in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Doubts around traditional formulations of the Trinity, and the person and work of Christ marked out a pathway from Arian subordinationism through Socinianism to Unitarianism. The outstanding example of this theological journey is Joseph Priestley, a product of the Dissenting academy at Daventry. In *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), Priestley argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is a sheer contradiction that was softened only by appeals to mystery. His two-volume *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1772–74) became the standard textbook of Unitarian beliefs. For Priestley, Christ is a human being only albeit one of supreme religious significance. Through a study of Scripture and church tradition, he argues that later doctrines of the incarnation and Trinity are corruptions of an original Christology which understood Jesus as a human person set apart by the providence of God. One estimate suggests that of the 250 Presbyterian chapels in England in 1812, more than one half espoused Unitarianism by 1824.¹³

Many of the Presbyterian ministers of Ulster had trained in Glasgow or on the continent. Francis Hutcheson, the leading philosopher of the early Scottish

¹³ Olive M. Griffiths, *Religion and Learning: A study in English Presbyterian Thought from 1662 to the Foundations of the Unitarian Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 1935), 150.

Enlightenment, had studied initially at the Dissenting Academy at Killyleagh in County Down and been licensed as a minister by the Presbytery of Armagh. As a result of the close ties between Scottish and Irish Presbyterians, the latter tended to mirror the disputes that divided the Church of Scotland, particularly with respect to the status of the civil authorities.¹⁴ The aforementioned first subscription controversy in the 1720s was generated by a minority of ministers who resisted the imposition of creedal tests in principle, unlike the second subscription controversy which involved those overtly sympathetic to Arian claims. Yet recent scholarship has suggested that even at the time of the first controversy there were already signs of the incursion of early Enlightenment views into Irish Presbyterianism, particularly through the work of those such as John Abernethy of Antrim who had established the Belfast Society in 1705. Here parallels with Latitudinarianism in England and Moderatism in Scotland have been drawn.¹⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, many of the more liberal and Unitarian trends that could be discerned in England at an earlier period were apparent amongst Irish Presbyterians.

In Scotland, the moderate clergy were at the forefront of debates on epistemology, ethics, history, literature and sociology. The cast of Enlightenment literati included figures such as Frances Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, Hugh Blair and George Campbell, all of whom were ministers of the Kirk. Much effort was expended in responding to the scepticism of their friend David Hume, the doyen of the Scottish Enlightenment, whether through the so-called common-sense philosophy of Reid or the defence of miracles by Campbell.

¹⁴ David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740–1890* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁵ For example, A. W. Godfrey Brown, 'A Theological Interpretation of the First Subscription Controversy (1719–1728)', in J. L. M. Haire (ed.), *Challenge and Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine* (Antrim: W & G Baird, 1981), 28–45.

In the present context, the most pressing question is whether there was anything distinctively Reformed in this range of intellectual activity. In some respects, it appears quite remote from the theological concerns that were evident around the time of the Marrow controversy; little attention is devoted to the doctrines of predestination or the work of Christ. A more positive view of human nature was suggested by Hutcheson's moral sense theory and Reid's account of our intellectual and practical powers than seems warranted by a Calvinist rendition of total depravity. The confidence in the power of reason to provide knowledge about the world, human nature and our social obligations appears to be far removed from the focus on Scripture and revelation that characterised Reformed orthodoxy. A much higher value is now attached to religious toleration, partly as a reaction to the violence of the covenanting era and partly in Scotland through a recognition of the benefits brought by union with England.

Nevertheless, writers such as Alexander Broadie have pointed to ways in which some standard Reformed tenets appear to be present in the sermons of Blair and the philosophical output of Reid.¹⁶ These include a stress on the limits of human knowledge, a sense of an overarching divine providence, and trust in a practical wisdom that is sufficient for the business of life. While these may be shorn of their links to election and the work of Christ, they represent a form of Reformed deism that remains in contact with the earlier theological tradition and is encapsulated in Wolterstorff's account of 'living wisely in the darkness.'¹⁷ God has constituted us in

¹⁶ Alexander Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), 113–150.

¹⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'God and Darkness in Reid' in Joseph Houston (ed.), *Thomas Reid: Context, Influence, Significance* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2004), 77–102.

such a way that we are given just sufficient light for our earthly existence. But we cannot speculate beyond this or aspire to the intellectual pretensions of earlier rationalist philosophies.

4. The Reception of German Philosophy, Theology and Biblical Criticism

One of the richest periods in history of theology, the nineteenth century witnessed a resurgence of interest in the classical Reformed tradition. Reacting against the Moderate hegemony of the Enlightenment period, evangelical theologians in Scotland displayed a renewed adherence to the Westminster Confession and the doctrinal tenets of Calvinist theology. After the Disruption of 1843, the theology of the Free Church was characterised by a commitment to biblical authority and to traditional Reformed teaching. A leading example is William Cunningham's posthumous *Historical Theology* (1862) which offers a formidable defence of Calvinist theology through the study of church history. Setting Pelagianism, Arminianism and Socinianism as stages on a slippery slope, Cunningham maintains that only Calvinist teaching can preserve the Scriptural witness to human sin, divine sovereignty and means of redemption. This is asserted as a recovery of the standard tenets of Reformed faith from the degeneracy of the Moderate era.¹⁸ It is also worth recalling in this context that through the efforts of the Calvin Translation Society a stream of publications appeared in Edinburgh which disseminated the writings of Calvin to a wider public constituency.

Yet by the second half of the nineteenth century, the influence of newer trends can be detected. The reception of idealist philosophy in England and Scotland was delayed,

¹⁸ William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Volume II, 2nd edition, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1864), 506–7.

but after the publication of James Hutchison Stirling's *The Secret of Hegel* (1865) its influence became marked, as did that of Kant whose critical philosophy provided the backdrop to idealism. Many Reformed theologians from Britain studied in German universities from about the 1860s; Marburg, Göttingen, Berlin and Tübingen became popular student destinations. The linguistic facility acquired by a younger generation of theologians enabled English translations of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack, Herrmann, Buber, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer. Much of this was facilitated by the emergence of a major theological publishing house in Edinburgh – T&T Clark, founded in 1821.

Idealism was more influential in philosophical than theological circles, although some of the key figures came from Reformed backgrounds, for example Edward Caird in Scotland and Henry Jones in Wales. Within theology, John Caird, brother of Edward, provided the most striking example of the appropriation of idealist philosophy into Christian doctrine. Caird held the Chair of Divinity in Glasgow and later became University Principal. His work included an exposition of the philosophy of Spinoza (1888), whose work he interpreted and sought to correct along the lines of Hegelian idealism. A similar strategy can be found in the writings of James Martineau, the leading Unitarian philosopher, who had also produced a study of Spinoza (1882) in which the Spinozist handling of substance is criticised. Martineau's own commitments to an ethical theism had been shaped by the German idealists and American transcendentalism. While his work may seem remote from the Protestant theology of his Huguenot ancestors, it can only be understood by reference to the tradition from which it emerged. For both Martineau and Caird, the link between ethics and theism, the stress on social reform, and the devotion to preaching are

conditioned by their Reformed heritage even as they move some distance from its earlier doctrinal basis.

Another significant figure, influenced if not captured by idealism, was A. M. Fairbairn whose career began in Scotland in the Evangelical Union but who later migrated to English Congregationalism, eventually becoming the first Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford in 1886. In many respects, Fairbairn provides a benchmark for the liberalising of Reformed theology in late Victorian Britain. He welcomed evolution and higher criticism, while also advocating the comparative study of religion. Viewing the sovereign power of God as overstated in Calvinism, he preferred instead to emphasise the divine fatherhood. Fairbairn's Christology is shaped by an account of Jesus' realization of a life of sonship before God. This is the ideal for the human race which he wills to impart to each person.¹⁹

Idealism may not have captured the hearts and minds of many Reformed theologians, perhaps because it continued to be viewed as pantheist and reductive of the doctrines of the person and work of Christ. But other German trends were more widely adopted by British Reformed theologians. These included the liberal theology of Ritschl, the higher criticism of Wellhausen, and the kenotic christologies of Gess and Thomasius. Ritschl's commitment was to historical study and to a Jesus whose significance resided in his instantiation of the kingdom of God, a community to be understood primarily in ethical and religious terms. Not only did this accentuate the importance of historical work, it also tended towards a depreciation of natural theology and speculative metaphysics. A. E. Garvie, who was later to become Principal of New

¹⁹ A. M. Fairbairn, *Christ in Modern Theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1868).

College and then Hackney College in London, produced an impressive study of Ritschlianism which revealed his immersion in the German theology of his day.²⁰ Here Ritschl's theology is commended for opposing speculative rationalism in its articulation of central Christian doctrines and for its positive stress on the Bible and Jesus. Discerning a divergence in the later Ritschlian school, he notes the emphasis upon more historical and practical work in Harnack, while commending writers like Kaftan and Herrmann for their return to evangelical themes including sin, atonement, the divinity of Christ and the work of the Spirit. Garvie himself might fairly be reckoned a 'liberal evangelical' throughout his career, and he advances Ritschl's approach as a remedy to the 'undue dependence on ecclesiastical authority' which he finds in Great Britain.²¹

The late-nineteenth century also witnessed the flourishing of higher criticism in British theology. Although it arrived relatively late from the continent, Biblical criticism proved capable of arousing widespread controversy. In Scotland, William Robertson Smith was removed from his post in the Free Church College at Aberdeen for opinions expressed in an article on the Bible in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Although his conclusions would now be quite commonplace, the manner in which he propagated his opinions was adjudged irresponsible and a nationwide controversy ensued. Robertson Smith maintained that his teaching was consistent with a strong account of Biblical authority – here he appealed to the Lutheran notion that the authority of Scripture resided in its witness to divine revelation in history rather than in any inherent property of inerrancy – but the Free Church of Scotland found this to be insufficient. Smith was later appointed to the

²⁰ A. E. Garvie, *The Ritschlian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 395.

Chair of Arabic in Cambridge. Subsequent heresy trials continued in Scotland although both George Adam Smith, an Aberdeen Old Testament scholar and Marcus Dods, an Edinburgh New Testament critic, prevailed against their opponents in the courts of the church.

In English Nonconformism, a similar process of engagement took place although without the high profile controversies that beset Scotland.²² Samuel Davidson resigned his position at Lancashire Independent College in Manchester in 1857 after he had raised doubts about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the nature of prophetic inspiration. Yet his case was the exception rather than the rule. After 1880, the English Free Churches came quite quickly to accept biblical criticism. Earlier fears of naturalism and doctrinal reductionism were largely banished by a theologically conservative group of scholars demonstrating that historical criticism could be constructively allied to orthodox belief. This approach of ‘believing criticism’ had gradually won the day in the Free Church of Scotland and so it did also in England around the same time. Alongside their Anglican and Methodist colleagues, the contribution of scholars from Reformed backgrounds to Biblical scholarship is evident in two respects. First, several of the leading figures to emerge in the twentieth century were from Presbyterian and Congregational backgrounds – C. H. Dodd, T. W. Manson, W. D. Davies and George Caird all achieved international prominence in the field. And some of the most successful attempts to disseminate the findings of Biblical scholarship in the wider church were undertaken by those with Reformed roots. These include William Roberston Nicoll, editor of *the Expositor’s Bible*, *The Expository* (established in 1884) and *The British Weekly* (established in 1886) and

²² See Willis B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Independent Press, 1954).

James Hastings who edited the *Dictionary of the Bible* (1898–1902), *The Expository Times* (from 1889), and the renowned thirteen-volume *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1908–21).

In the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, suspicion of Biblical criticism continued well into the twentieth century. The rigorous inerrantism of the Free Church of Scotland in its earlier years was maintained until the late-nineteenth century in Belfast. A key figure here was Robert Watts who viewed the work of his more liberal colleagues in Edinburgh with some suspicion, preferring instead the greater orthodoxy of the Hodges and Warfield in Princeton. The influence of Watts and others coupled with the different denominational and political situation in Northern Ireland prevented historical criticism from gaining a foothold until the arrival of a younger generation of Biblical scholars such as Thomas Walker. Despite being investigated for heresy in the 1920s both Ernest Davey, a church historian, and James Haire, a theologian, were exonerated, thus suggesting that a cautious adoption of historical criticism could be maintained.

While Biblical criticism was being hotly debated, theologians were generally making their peace with Darwinism through advocating theories of theistic evolution which left most of their theological convictions undisturbed. This was certainly true in Scotland in the work of Robert Flint and Robert Rainy, Principal of New College, whose inaugural lecture in 1874 pointed cautiously though decisively towards an accommodation with Darwinism. Like his Anglican counterparts, he was able to offer a qualified welcome to the new evolutionary science. The exception was in Belfast where John Tyndall's explosive address to the British Association for the

Advancement of Science in the same year was widely perceived as an explicit attack on theology. It produced a succession of ripostes from Presbyterian theologians, especially Watts who thundered against the new science as interpreted by Tyndall as redolent of a dangerously immoral Epicureanism. This was a system which had ‘wrought the ruin of the communities and individuals who have acted out its principles in the past; and if the people of Belfast substitute it for the holy religion of the Son of God, and practise its degrading dogmas, the moral destiny of the metropolis of Ulster may easily be forecast.’²³ One consequence of this was that Presbyterian theology in Belfast tended to view evolutionary theory as inherently naturalist and anti-theistic in its loss of teleological notions.²⁴ As David Livingstone has shown, ‘the theory of evolution was absorbed in Edinburgh, repudiated in Belfast, and tolerated in Princeton.’²⁵

Kenotic christology, another German import, flourished on Reformed as well as Anglican soil in the writings of A. B. Bruce, H. R. Mackintosh and P. T. Forsyth.²⁶ Kenoticism enabled theologians to combine a commitment to the historical Jesus as discerned by gospel criticism with the classical christology of Chalcedon, while also resonating with the notion of the suffering of God which was so prevalent in Anglican theology from *Lux Mundi* (1889) onwards. The Jesus of the gospels could not perform miracles in his home town. He confessed his ignorance of the precise conditions of the

²³ Quoted by David N. Livingstone, ‘Science, religion and the reception of Darwinism in Princeton, Belfast and Edinburgh’, in *Disseminating Darwinism: The Role of Place, Race, Religion, and Gender* (eds.) R. L. Numbers and J. Stenhouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7–38 (14).

²⁴ For further discussion see Andrew R. Holmes, ‘Presbyterians and science in the north of Ireland before 1874’, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 41.4 (2008), 541–565.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, 16.

²⁶ A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1876), H. R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1909). See also David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis Explored and Defended* (London: SCM, 2011).

end times, and he struggled to submit to the will of God in the days of his passion, all of which confirmed his human finitude. To make sense of these creaturely aspects of Christ while yet affirming his divinity, kenotic theologians, following Philippians 2: 5–11, appealed to the notion of the Son of God divesting or emptying himself of his divinity.

In one the most nuanced defences of divine kenosis, P. T. Forsyth, Principal of Hackney College in London, argued that we should not view this as a psychological theory of *how* God became human – this is a hopeless pursuit which is beyond our capacity. Nor should we regard the Son of God as simply abandoning his divinity. We would do much better to think in terms of a contraction or change in the mode in which divinity is expressed. (H. R. Mackintosh spoke similarly of a ‘transposition’ of powers.) Under the conditions of a human life, divinity is dynamically manifested so as to enable development, growth of self-consciousness and the fulfilment of Christ’s divine identity in his resurrection and ascension. Forsyth’s kenotic christology is determined by his conviction that the fundamental characteristic of God is ‘holy love’ which must be ‘intensified within the conditions of the saving work’.²⁷ This requires us to think of a kenotic movement on the part of God rather than an abandonment of divinity. If we cannot explain the psychology of the incarnation, we must at least affirm that the ‘divine qualities were kept, but only in the mode that salvation made necessary.’²⁸ Forsyth’s approach tends to eschew kenosis as the metaphysic fulcrum of the incarnation; instead it becomes a category for understanding the person and work of Christ dramatically and historically. And yet, as Colin Gunton later pointed out, Forsyth does not altogether escape the use of metaphysical language in his claims

²⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 319.

²⁸ Ibid.

about different modes of being.²⁹ Here again some of the standard problems of kenoticism begin to emerge. Forsyth would probably argue that ‘it is a choice of difficulties’³⁰ and that without some use of kenotic language we are unable to make sense of the story of Jesus as genuinely human and historical.

Kenotic christology faced serious criticism from a subsequent generation of theologians. The standard criticisms were registered by Donald Baillie: the kenoticists, he argued, could not do justice to the eternal humanity of Christ which seems to be a feature of the New Testament and the creeds; it created speculative problems about the cosmic functions of the divine Logos during the years of Christ’s life on earth; and the standard theories tended to reduce the incarnation to a temporary metamorphosis rather than to present it as the self-revelation of the eternal being of God.³¹ Yet Baillie also suggests, appealing to the work of Sergius Bulgakov, that the concept of kenosis as God’s self-giving can be viewed as an expression of God’s eternal identity within the Trinity and analogously in creation, incarnation and atonement. Although this is not developed, it is a view that is not so far from that of P. T. Forsyth. As Gunton also remarked, ‘Forsyth very nearly said that.’³²

5. Twentieth-Century Personalism

The category of the ‘personal’ received close philosophical attention in the philosophy of the late 19th century and was adopted by several leading theologians. John Oman, a United Presbyterian minister from Orkney, taught for most of his career at Westminster College, Cambridge. His personalist theology was ethical, evolutionary

²⁹ Colin E. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), 169–173.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

³¹ Donald M. Baillie, *God Was In Christ* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 94–98.

³² *Ibid.*, 172.

and liberal in its leanings.³³ For Oman, the nature of personhood requires us to think of the human subject as ethical, religious and social in its dimensions. Divine grace is not coercive but works with the grain of human freedom in a personal relationship that is life-enhancing and ethically fruitful. Our encounter with God is neither deterministic nor mystical but free and personal. On this basis, Oman reworks traditional accounts of sin, redemption and faith. Here Christ appears as the focal and unifying expression of God's grace who is encountered in the claims of others upon us.

Oman's personalist theology moves in a universalist direction, especially with its tendency to break down the sharp distinction between general and special revelation. This proved influential on later generations of theologians who trained at Westminster College, especially H. H. Farmer and John Hick. Farmer, a distinguished preacher, who became Norris Hulse Professor in Cambridge, extended the strong sense of Kantian moral encounter while combining this with his explorations in Christian doctrine in *The Word of Reconciliation* (1966). John Hick, one of Farmer's pupils, developed a religious epistemology around the notion of an interpreted encounter with the divine presence, later extending this into a pluralist theology of religions which has become a major focus of debate in recent years. Hick viewed his departure from Farmer as a return to the more inclusive approach of Oman.³⁴

Returning to Edinburgh in 1934 from Union Theological Seminary in New York, John Baillie adjusted his earlier liberal theology which had been established upon a

³³ John Oman, *Grace and Personality*, revised edition (Cambridge University Press, 1919),

³⁴ For an account of the relation of Oman and Farmer to Hick, see John Hick, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: One World, 2002), 84–87.

Kantian moral base. In its place, he develops the notion of ‘mediated immediacy’ in his most original work, *Our Knowledge of God* (1936). Our knowledge of God is neither unmediated nor inferred but is given in immediate encounter through the forms of other people, nature and the story of Christ. Drawing upon much of the personalist and anti-Cartesian philosophical writing of the period, Baillie develops a position that is more Christocentric than his earlier epistemology while still open to more general forms of our knowledge of God. Yet, despite his upbringing in the rigorously Calvinist setting of the Free Church manse at Gairloch, his commitment to the Reformed tradition is at most implicit. It may be more evident in his ecclesial commitments and social theology, than in his doctrinal allegiances.³⁵ His devotional classic – *The Diary of Private Prayer* (1936) – became the best-selling work of any Scottish theologian and is translated into many languages.

Donald Baillie, younger brother of John, taught at the University of St Andrews from 1934. His most distinguished work was the aforementioned *God Was in Christ* (1948). Here he attempts to explicate the person of Jesus by reference to what he calls the ‘paradox of grace’. Following 1 Corinthians 15:10, he claims that we are most free when our lives are captured by the grace of God working in us. The more God is alive in us, the more we become truly ourselves. Arguing that this provides a clue to the person of Christ as human and divine, Baillie claims that the paradox is present in a form that is complete and perfect in his life. ‘Is it not the same *type* of paradox, taken at the absolute degree, that was the life of a man and yet also in a deeper and prior sense, the very life of God incarnate.’³⁶ His work has remained one of the more

³⁵ See David Fergusson (ed.), *Christ, Church and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

³⁶ Donald M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 129.

important twentieth-century essays in Christology, although critics continue to ask whether its key formulation can escape the charge of adoptionism despite Baillie's avowed intention to present a high Christology.

In surveying the personalist orientation of these theologians, one must ask again to what extent their work is indebted to the classical Reformed tradition. In terms of their ecclesiological commitments and the piety displayed in their writings, there are clear signs of the habits and ethos of the Reformed churches – all were heavily involved in the life of their churches and in demand as preachers. There is also an attention to Scripture and to the importance of its critical interpretation. Yet in other respects, there is a scarcely concealed antagonism to the tenets of classical Reformed theology. Robert Mackintosh, who made his mark within English Congregationalism, regarded himself as a refugee from the outworn creeds and dogmas of Scottish Calvinism.³⁷ David S. Cairns in Aberdeen lamented him time as a student in Princeton in the 1880s, citing his hatred of Charles Hodge's dogmatism and Principal Patton's defence of double predestination.³⁸ In his later years, it was said that A. E. Garvie could not contemplate a revival of Calvinism without revulsion. The doctrine of predestination was often regarded as sub-Christian, the account of divine grace was perceived as deterministic, the verbal inspiration of Scripture was viewed as impossible in the age of higher criticism, and the standard teaching on other religions was believed to be in need of radical revision. In all these ways, Reformed theology had seemingly departed from its confessional origins. For the most part, it has not returned. This ambivalence towards earlier phases of the tradition may account for the plasticity of much

³⁷ Cited by Alan P. F. Sell, *Nonconformist Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 8.

³⁸ Quoted by A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1983), 75.

Reformed theology in the British Isles and the tendency in some quarters easily to absorb intellectual influences from the wider theological culture, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Allied to this was a greater freedom of experimentation which can be perceived as both a strength and a weakness. In other ways, however, subsequent developments were soon to reawaken the dormant interest in the historical roots of the Reformed tradition.

6. The reception of Karl Barth's theology

Reaction against the spiritual sterility of liberal theology coincided with the arrival of Karl Barth on the British theological scene after 1920. Densil Morgan's fine study has registered the full range of positive and negative reactions.³⁹ The most formidable of Barth's exponents in the English-speaking world was Thomas F. Torrance who established a strong base for Barth scholarship at New College, Edinburgh, despite the more ambivalent attitude of his teacher John Baillie. Building on the earlier reception of John McConnachie and H. R. Mackintosh, Torrance produced an important study of the development of Barth's theology⁴⁰ while also presiding over the English-translation of the *Church Dogmatics*, published by T&T Clark. In addition, the *Scottish Journal of Theology* which he founded with J. K. S. Reid in 1948 became an important forum for sympathetic scholarly engagement with Barth's theology and the wider Reformed tradition. He was also responsible for oversight of the translation of Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries*.

³⁹ D. Densil Morgan, *Barth Reception in Britain* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

⁴⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: an introduction to his early theology, 1910–31* (London: SCM, 1962).

Torrance's own theology developed from the 1950s, with a steady output of essays and books appearing over the next forty years. Never allowing himself to be narrowly typecast as an interpret of Barth, with whom he had sharply differed over issues in sacramental theology, he pursued his own lines of enquiry in relation to dogmatics, the relationship of theology to science, and on the history of theology. Although undertaken from within the Reformed tradition and in close proximity to his understanding of Calvin, his work was fiercely critical of seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy, especially the Westminster Confession. More positively, his affinities with the Greek Fathers, especially Athanasius and Cyril, did much to promote the Reformed-Orthodox ecumenical conversations.

Within English Nonconformism, a significant if neglected contribution to Barth studies can be found. Although P. T. Forsyth, once described as a 'Barthian before Barth', did not live long enough to interact with Barth, his pupils such as Sydney Cave, F. W. Camfield and H. F. Lovell Cocks were well prepared to do so. Allied to their enthusiasm was a reaction within English Congregationalism against the prevailing liberalism, accompanied by clarion calls to return to the theological origins of the dissenting tradition. Including Nathaniel Micklem, Bernard Lord Manning and J. S. Whale, 'the new Genevans' advocated a return to a more dialectical theology which re-asserted human sinfulness and divine redemption in more traditional categories. In all this, Barth's theology proved seminal.⁴¹

⁴¹ F. W. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit: an essay in the Barthian theology* (London: Elliott Stock, 1933); A. W. Whitehouse *The Authority of Grace: essays in response to Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981); J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge University Press, 1942).

Morgan's commentary also reveals the impressive Welsh engagement with Barth's early work.⁴² The closing sermon in *Komm, Schöpfer Geist!* was translated in a weekly Congregationalist newspaper in 1928; this preceded the first English translation of his work. Barth's dialectical theology aroused enthusiastic reaction amongst Welsh preachers, perhaps owing to some of the similarities between the Swiss Reformed churches and Nonconformist congregations in Wales, with their strong traditions in Calvinist theology and preaching.. The most effective exponent of Barth's theology was John Edward Daniel (1902–62) whose exposition of Pauline theology was heavily indebted to the *Römerbrief* and the *Christliche Dogmatik*.⁴³ Although not a prolific writer, Daniel was highly influential, particularly as a critic of liberalism in his church and in his advocacy of a stronger and more dialectical approach. 'Karl Barth's service is to have restored the ancient scandal of the gospel to our self-sufficient world, without concern for the views of the philosophers or scientists, but mindful only of the claims of the gospel.'⁴⁴ Elsewhere in the UK, the influence of Barth and the Reformed tradition in general was represented in post-war ecumenical circles by Daniel Jenkins and Lesslie Newbigin, by Colin Gunton at King's College, London, and at the Assembly's College (Union College from 1978) in Belfast by J. L. M. Haire and his successor John Thompson. Haire had been a translator of Barth, and Thompson later produced valuable studies of his work.⁴⁵

7. Conclusion

⁴² Densil Morgan, *Barth Reception in Britain*, op. cit., 48–62.

⁴³ J. E. Daniel, *Dysgeidiaeth yr Apostol Paul* (Abertawe: Llyfrfa'r Annibynwr, 1933).

⁴⁴ Quoted by Morgan, op. cit., 195.

⁴⁵ For example, John M. Thompson, *Christ in Perspective: Christological perspectives in the theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1978).

Reformed theology in the British Isles reveals a striking latitude and absorption of intellectual shifts from the Enlightenment onwards. Similar trends, developments, controversies and challenges can be discerned, these being handled in ways that could also reflect the different ecclesiastical, intellectual and social conditions that obtained in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In the face of this theological diversity, we may doubt whether there is a single coherent tradition in clear continuity with the confessional standards of the early modern period. Nevertheless, Reformed theology has also displayed a rootedness in the life of the churches, particularly in the ministry of preaching, the attention to Scripture in theological writing, in social and ecumenical commitment, and in the intermittent influence of the leading Reformed theologians – Calvin, Schleiermacher and Barth. If not unifying the work of theologians across the Reformed churches, these constitute recurrent themes which are likely to prove vital to any renewal in the twenty-first century.⁴⁶

Recommended Reading

Fergusson, David *Scottish Philosophical Theology 1700–2000* (Exeter: Imprint Press, 2007)

Griffiths, Olive M. *Religion and Learning: A study in English Presbyterian Thought from 1662 to the Foundations of the Unitarian Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 1935)

⁴⁶ I am grateful to Alan Sell, Andrew Holmes, Jay Brown and Densil Morgan for advice and reading suggestions on key aspects of this essay.

McBride I. R., *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

Pope, Robert (ed.) *T&T Clark Companion to Nonconformity* (London: T&T Clark, 2013)

Sell, Alan P. F. *Dissenting Thought and the Life of the churches: Studies in the English Tradition* (San Francisco: Edwin Mellen, 1990)

Torrance, Thomas F. *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996)